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AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

1. (Original) *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain, as deposited on May 29, 2002 under the accession number LMG P-21524, encoding exopolysaccharide production.

2. (Original) A functional starter culture comprising an exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain of Claim 1.

3. (Original) A co-culture comprising an exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain of Claim 1.

4. (Currently amended) Use of~~A method of using~~ a functional starter culture ~~or a co-culture~~ according to Claim 2 ~~or 3~~ for the production of high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2.10^6 Dalton during fermentation.

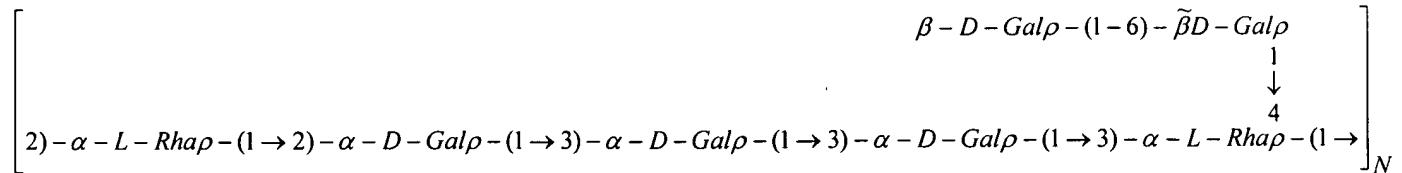
5. (Currently amended) Use of~~A method of using~~ a functional starter culture ~~or a co-culture~~ according to Claim 2 ~~or 3~~ for the fermentation of a food product.

6. (Original) A method for preparing an exopolysaccharide comprising culturing an exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain in a medium comprising milk and lactalbumin hydrolysate.

7. (Original) A method according to Claim 6, wherein said medium further comprises at least one additional mono- or disaccharide.

8. (Currently amended) A method according to Claim 6 [[or 7]] characterized in that at least 60 % or 80 % by weight of said exopolysaccharide has a molecular mass of at least 2.10^6 Dalton.

9. (Currently amended) A method according to ~~any of Claims 6 to 8~~Claim 6 characterized in that said exopolysaccharide has the following structure:



wherein N is between 800 and 7000.

10. (Currently amended) A method according to ~~any of Claims 7 to 9~~Claim 7 wherein said monosaccharide is ~~chosen from~~selected from the group consisting of glucose, galactose or fructose.

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11. (Currently amended) A method according to any of Claims 7 to 9Claim 7 wherein said disaccharide is sucrose.

12. (Currently amended) A method according to any of Claims 6 to 11Claim 6 wherein a *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain, as deposited on May 29, 2002 under the accession number LMG P-21524, encoding exopolysaccharide productionstrain according to Claim 1 is used.

13. (Currently amended) A high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least 2.10^6 Dalton obtainable by the method of any of Claims 6 to 12Claim 6.

14. (Original) A method for improving the texture of a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

15. (Original) A method for improvement of water retention in a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

16. (Original) A method for decreasing syneresis of a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

17. (Original) A method for improvement of water retention during the fermentation process comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

18. (Original) A method for producing a dairy product comprising adding to the initial dairy product starter culture or adding during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain according to Claim 1.

19. (Currently amended) Use ofA method of using a *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1 for the production of high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 10^6 Dalton in food fermentation processes.

20. (Currently amended) Use ofA method of using a functional starter culture or a co-culture according to Claim 5 wherein said food product is a dairy product.

21. (Currently amended) Use of a functional starter culture or a co-cultureThe method according to Claim 20 wherein said dairy product is chosen selected from the group

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consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark and kefir.

22. (Currently amended) A dairy product obtainable by ~~any of the methods of Claims 14 to 18~~ the method of claim 14.

23. (Original) A dairy product according to Claim 22 which is a Mozzarella cheese.

24. (Original) A functional starter culture for the fermentation of a yoghurt comprising a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1 and a culture of *Lactobacillus delbrueckii* subsp. *bulgaricus*.

25. (Currently amended) ~~Use of~~ A method of using a high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least 2.10^6 according to Claim 13 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product.

26. (Currently amended) ~~Use of~~ A method of using a high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least 2.10^6 according to Claim 13 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product for improving water retention of the food product.

27. (Currently amended) ~~Use of~~ A method of using a high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least 2.10^6 according to claim 13 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product for decreasing syneresis.

28. (Currently amended) ~~Use of~~ A method of using an exopolysaccharide according to Claim 13 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product for improving the texture of said food product.

29. (Currently amended) ~~Use~~ The method according to ~~any of Claims 25 to 28~~ Claim 25 wherein said food product is ~~chosen~~ selected from the group consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, soups, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark, kefir and sauces.

30. (Original) A functional starter culture comprising an exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain for the production of high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2.10^6 Dalton during fermentation.

31. (Original) A co-culture comprising an exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain for the production of high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2.10^6 Dalton during fermentation.

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32. (New) A method of using a co-culture according to Claim 3 for the production of high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2.10^6 Dalton during fermentation.

33. (New) A method of using a co-culture according to Claim 3 for the fermentation of a food product.

34. (New) A method of using a co-culture according to Claim 33 wherein said food product is a dairy product.

35. (New) The method according to Claim 34 wherein said dairy product is selected from the group consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark and kefir.

36. (New) A dairy product obtainable by the method of claim 18.

37. (New) A dairy product according to Claim 36 which is a Mozzarella cheese.